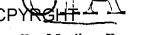
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By Marilyn Berger

Newsday Diplomatic Correspondent

The popular image of the CIA operative usually comes straight from the movies: a slightly soiled trench coat, a turned-up collar, sunglasses. But in Laos, at least, the reality is apt to be less James Bond and more a clean-cut fellow in a sport shirt.

For years now, the Central Intelli-Sence Agency has played a covert role

years, the agency's undercover activity has been known, but its role has somewhat changed.

In the more free-wheeling days, there was the chance to set up strongmen, polarize political forces and even fill up money bags to buy votes. But now, the CIA, through its agents in their sport shirts, apparently is training and equipping an army of Meo tribesmen.

The fact that the "spies," or "spooks" as they are semi-affectionately called in government lingo, are involved in training an army, a job that might be expected to fall to the Pentagon, is not entirely sinister. Ever since the signing of the Geneva accords in 1962, the U.S. has sought to maintain the fiction that it is abiding by the rules, and that means keeping out American troops. The last four Presidents felt that the accords, which the U.S. accuses Hanoi of being the first toviolate, could best be restored if appearances, at least, were observed.

Those within the government who: are sympathetic to that view are deeply concerned about the current congressional uproar over U.S. involvement in Laos. They say that congressional leaders, as well as the members of the Senate and House committees dealing with the CIA, armed services and appropriations, have known for years what was going on in Laos. They say that the activity was funneled through the CIA not to keep it secret from the American people but rather to preserve the necessary facade for international diplomacy.

Of course, it was not only for the the job in the old days. In the Dulles- tight ever since, were more the designation of Thelles era, when John Foster Dulles;

did a lot nure than gather intelligence and recruit local agents.

organization among the non-with the tribal army. Communist Lao, the CIA apparently The army is head patriotic organization, rather than a

mately lent some truth to that.

The committee became the step tian offensive. That leader was Phoumi Nosavan.

If Laction politics were confused,: there was something of a match within the American diplomatic community in Laos. The ambassador was never sure that he was in charge of his own mission, and in many cases was sure that he was not. The CIA was forever pushing for greater activism. Its agents "free-wheeled it," in the words of one informed source, and engineered a coup. And then another one six months later.

Phoumi had begun to count on the CIA, which had chosen him over Souvanna Phouma. But just when Phoumi really needed help, the CIA began feeling a clampdown ordered by President, Kennedy because of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In Laos, where Winthrop Brown ; was ambassador, the CIA was forced sake of appearances that the CIA did Officials say that the roins have been 'to argue its cases through channels.

was secretary of state and his brother. The U.S. started arming and train-Allen headed the CIA, the agency had, ing the Meo tribesmen as early as a relatively free hand, and in Laos, it 1960. Yet it was the recent disclosure that the U.S. was arming the Moos tough tribesmen with a particular It was in 1957 that the agency grudge against the North Vietnamese, started exerting noticeable influence on that helped trigger the current uproar the political affairs of that perennially against U.S. activities in Laos. Many. unsettled country. In an effort to dis-lof the 1,040 Americans admitted to be pel the apathy, dissension and lack of working in Laos scene reportedly are

The army is headed by Maj. Gen. in the twilight war of Laos. (Some call helped organize the Committee for the Vang Pao, a Laotian military comit a nonwar in a noncountry.) For Defense of National Interests. The mander in northeastern Laos who committee described itself as a mass keeps his people in line by force of political party, which favored civil leadership and also by having one wife service reforms and a "hard" line for each of the four tribal areas. The against the Communist Pathet Lao. Meos have been successful in their battles beyond any expectation and. The Communists considered its have become a significant thorn in the. members "lackeys" to American inter-side of Hanoi. It is believed that the ests, and it appeared that the organiza- North Vietnamese have made elimination's dependence on the CIA ulti-tion of Vang Pao and his tribesmen one of the goals in their current Lac-

ladder for a future Laotian leader who The CIA and how it grew in Laos is, was so closely tied to the CIA that he ironic way, almost-a success. was known to its agents as "our boy." story which runs from the error of: trying to set up a western-type army Phoumi was, by all reports, a patriot, with a military strong man in Phoumi who genuinely sought to develop the Nosavan to the arming of a highly able country, but he was not above acceptaguerrilla warrior, Vang Po. What is ing huge sums from a foreign power, happening in Laos now, one informed Phoumi was so valuable that the CIA source said, is what should have been rigged the 1960 election in his favor, done in Vietnam.

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